

Government has made a good start on opening up a route to open access but it will be left to researchers to push for the establishment of publication funds at universities and to shape the way these are run. **Stephen Curry** (http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/blog-contributors/#Stephen_Curry) asks academics to get ready to agitate for open access.



This article originally appeared on Stephen Curry's personal blog, 'Reciprocal Space' (<http://occamstypewriter.org/scurry/>).

Well that was quick. Less than a month after the Finch working group published its recommendations (<http://occamstypewriter.org/scurry/2012/06/18/the-finch-report-on-open-access/>) on the future of open access, UK science minister David Willetts has responded, saying in effect "Let's go for it." The government has taken essentially all of the recommendations on board and has committed the country (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2012/jul/15/free-access-british-scientific-research>) to making all its publicly-funded research available for free online by 2014.

Except that it's not quite that simple. There are weak points in the government's response (<http://www.bis.gov.uk/news/topstories/2012/Jul/government-to-open-up-publicly-funded-research>), but in other areas the policy implementation has actually gone beyond what Finch recommended. Let me deal with the weaknesses first.

The point-by-point response (4-page PDF (<http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/science/docs/l/12-975-letter-government-response-to-finch-report-research-publications.pdf>)) by David Willetts to the ten recommendations, which cover a range of issues, makes it clear that there will be no new money to lubricate the transition to open access. As a result, the implementation of several of the recommendations remains decidedly aspirational. It is yet to be seen how the health sector or businesses will secure access to the research literature, how university libraries will negotiate with publishers to ensure that subscription prices reflect the increase in open access content, or how scholarly monographs will be paid for (a major concern for the social sciences and humanities). These matters are now left for the relevant institutions and stakeholders to figure out — but with no timescale for resolution imposed.

On the plus side, the proposals that relate most directly to the work of publicly-funded researchers are laid out much more clearly because they have already been incorporated into the new open access policy (<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/media/news/2012news/Pages/120716.aspx>) of Research Councils UK (RCUK), which was also timed for release on the same day. The policy appears to have retained all the muscle that was evident in a draft document (<http://occamstypewriter.org/scurry/2012/03/18/elsevier-the-research-works-act-and-open-access-where-to-now/>) that was circulated back in March and even shows signs of having worked out. It's a strong statement that surpasses the Finch recommendations.

For starters, from 1st April 2013:

Peer reviewed research papers which result from research that is wholly or partially funded by the Research Councils:

- 1. must be published in journals which are compliant with Research Council policy on Open Access*
- 2. must include details of the funding that supported the research, and a statement on how the underlying research materials – such as data, samples or models – can be accessed.*

The document makes it clear that a compliant journal is one that permits either immediate free access to readers on payment of an Article Processing Charge (APC) (gold OA) or, if that option is not made available by the publisher, allows the author to deposit their final peer-reviewed version in a repository (green

OA) no more than 6 months after publication (12 months for AHRC and ESRC funded work in the humanities, economics and social sciences).

What is more, if an APC is paid, the article must be accorded a CC-BY (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>) Creative Commons licence, which allows extensive rights to copy and distribute the content, even by commercial organisations. If no APC is paid, the deposited copy must still be made available “without restrictions on non-commercial re-use” (I *think* this may mean CC-BY-NC (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/>) but would welcome any correction). These are robust conditions.

What is even more is that both routes to open access must allow “unrestricted use of manual and automated text and data mining tools”, a condition that will facilitate deeper and broader analyses of the research literature.

And that’s not all — condition 2 above places an obligation on authors to ensure that the data that their conclusions are based on are also made available and should be clearly sign-posted within the paper. This is an important dimension to open access — it is good for transparency and for research integrity. I half suspect this a response to criticisms of climate scientists who, in the wake of climategate (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/blog/2012/apr/24/uea-climate-change-email-publicity>) were criticised for not making their data easily accessible; but perhaps it simply reflects a growing trend.

What about the money, and the vexed issue of costs (<http://occamstypewriter.org/scurry/2012/06/27/finch-report-the-question-of-costs/>), which has excited much of the negative response to the Finch report? Here again there is bad and good. On the bad side, there is no new money to help the excess costs of transition (when OA and subscription costs have to be borne), but that is hardly a surprise in these austere times and may even help to exert some downward pressure on the level of APCs.

The good thing, however, is that the Research Councils have finally adopted a flexible model (<http://occamstypewriter.org/scurry/2012/02/21/an-open-letter-on-open-access-to-uk-research-councils/>) for funding of publications that is similar to the one adopted by the Wellcome Trust (<http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/About-us/Policy/Policy-and-position-statements/WTD002766.htm>). What will now happen is that money for publication costs, rather than being included in time-limited funding awards to individual investigators, will be paid as a block grant to the host institution, which will be required to establish an open access fund. This nicely addresses a criticism I made (<http://occamstypewriter.org/scurry/2012/02/21/an-open-letter-on-open-access-to-uk-research-councils/>) back in February, but what isn’t yet clear is exactly how these awards will be calculated. I imagine there is some concern among universities as to whether the Research Councils will get their sums right. Nevertheless establishment of such funds (already in existence in some universities, including my own (<http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/library/subjectsandsupport/openaccess/oafund>)), also creates a possible mechanism for the transfer of journal subscription funds, currently provided via HEFCE, as the publication model shifts from subscriptions to APC-supported open access.

There is still much to be done. The UK government deserves credit for staking out its position so boldly but this is a risky stratagem and it is to be hoped that its ambition will set an example for other countries to emulate. We can have some reassurance in the fact that there is already momentum towards open access in the US (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2012/may/22/us-petition-open-access-publishing>) and the EU (<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=419949>).

Moreover, as will be clear from this synopsis, many details of the process remain to be sorted. Some commentators have bemoaned the fact that the government’s endorsement panders too readily to publishers’ interests and current prices (see Stevan Harnad’s comments (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2012/jul/15/free-access-british-scientific-research>) in the Guardian). However, it is important to see today’s announcement not as an end-point but as a beginning. If we, the community that generates and reviews the research literature, want a publication system that is accessible and effective and that represents good value for money, we have to agitate for it (and the attendant

culture change, part of which will involve breaking free (<http://occamstypewriter.org/scurry/2012/04/22/eyes-on-the-prize-are-blind-to-reality/>) from impact factors). We have to get involved in the establishment of the publication funds at our universities and shape the ways that they are run. There is plenty of scope to get this right; the government has made a good start but it is down to us to finish the job.

If you would like to hear Stephen being interviewed briefly about the announcement on the BBC World Service's NewsHour (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio/player/p00vc0g6>), start at 44:00 (not sure how long this link will work).

Related posts:

1. What about the authors who can't pay? Why the government's embrace of gold open access isn't something to celebrate (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2012/07/17/finch-what-about-authors-who-cant-pay/>)
2. The Finch Report on open access: it's complicated (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2012/06/21/finch-report-open-access/>)
3. Restricting online access: what evidence do publishers have to support their claims that open access negatively affects sales? (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/12/05/restricting-online-access-what-evidence/>)
4. Elsevier, the Research Works Act and Open Access: where to now? (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2012/04/02/elsevier-boycott-where-to-now/>)
5. The Finch Report illustrates the new strategy wars of open access (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2012/07/02/strategy-wars-open-access/>)